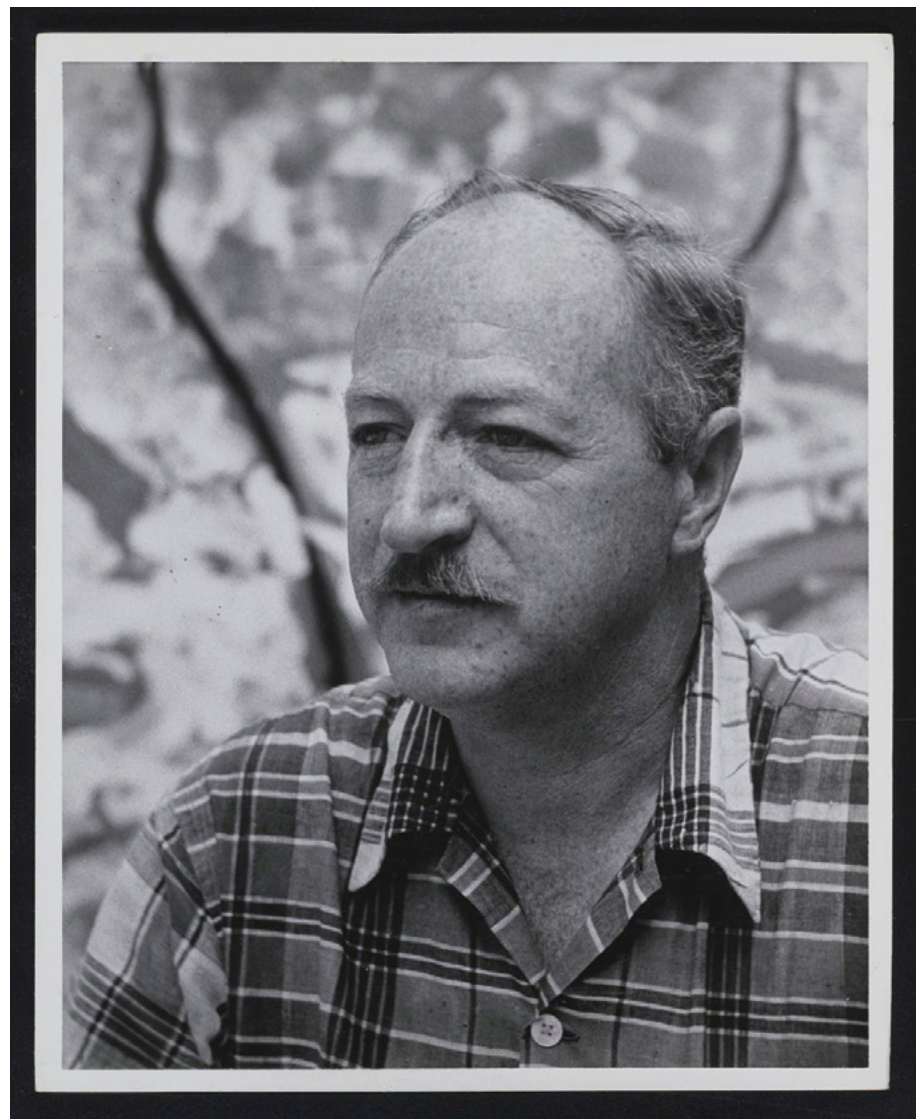




John Ferren

From Paris to Springs



FINDLAY GALLERIES
THREE CENTURIES IN ART

John Ferren

————— (1905 - 1970) —————

From Paris to Springs

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John Ferren | Biography

In many ways, John Ferren’s story is one of reinvention. Millard James Ferren was born in Pendleton, Oregon, on October 17, 1905, to Verna Zay Wistfall and James William Ferren. He adopted the name John in what may have been his first personal reinvention on moving to San Francisco sometime after high school, around 1925.

Prior to his move to San Francisco, Ferren was a member of the Potboiler Players, a theatrical company in Los Angeles. In addition to dramatic performances, the group also held revivals of rare and foreign films. During this period, Ferren worked at a plaster casting factory. While his later internship with a stonecutter is cited as an influence on Ferren’s remarkable plaster works from the late 1930s, his work in the plaster factory surely, too, had an impact.

In 1929, while traveling in Europe, several experiences caused Ferren to adjust his trajectory. While cycling in southern France, he encountered Hans Hofmann, Vyclav Vytacil and Glen Wessels at Hofmann’s summer school in St. Tropez. Ferren would meet Hofmann again in Germany while attending a Matisse exhibition, which he credited drawing his interest away from sculpture and toward painting.

Ferren was largely self-taught, although he studied briefly at the California School of Fine Arts (now known as San Francisco Art Institute) and later took classes at the Sorbonne, Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and Académie Ranson. According to Ferren, his real education came in and around cafes and studios in Paris, where he primarily lived between 1931 – 1938. In a conversation with Irving Sandler, Ferren shared an amusing anecdote recalling when he witnessed Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso in conversation in a Parisian café. Certain there was a lesson to be learned, he moved close enough to eavesdrop and overheard Picasso remark, “Now Georges, that’s not the way to put in plumbing.”

Importantly, Ferren was one of few artists of the New York School to have first been ensconced in the Parisian prewar artistic community and the circle of Gertrude Stein. He was respected by his fellow artists in a manner that many Americans were not, even earning inclusion in Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*, where she describes Ferren as: “the only American painter foreign painters in Paris consider a painter and whose painting interests them. He is young yet and might, only perhaps nobody can, do that thing called abstract painting.”

Although Ferren’s contributions to “The Club” are well documented, earlier he had limited association with the American Abstract Artists. On returning to the United States in 1938, Ferren started attending AAA meetings. However, he did not share the frustrations upon which the group had been founded – that abstract art was not being supported enough by galleries and museums. Indeed by 1940, Ferren had received one-man shows at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, The Minneapolis Art Institute, Arts Club (Chicago), San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Corcoran Gallery, among others. In 1940, when George L.K. Morris attached Ferren’s name without permission to a MoMA protest flier, Ferren emphatically terminated any association with the group, having never officially been a member.

During World War II, Ferren served with the Office of War Information in the North African and European theaters. By this time, Ferren had reintroduced representation into his paintings without giving up abstraction. It wasn’t until the end of WWII that he turned to Abstract Expressionism.

In 1946, Ferren moved to a loft at 52 East 9th Street and began his association with the artists that would become the New York School. During this period, the Cedar Street Tavern, the Waldorf Cafeteria, and the 8th Street Club became the new “cafes” of Ferren’s development as an artist.

For a complete biography, visit www.findlaygalleries.com



1930s

Abstract Geometrics

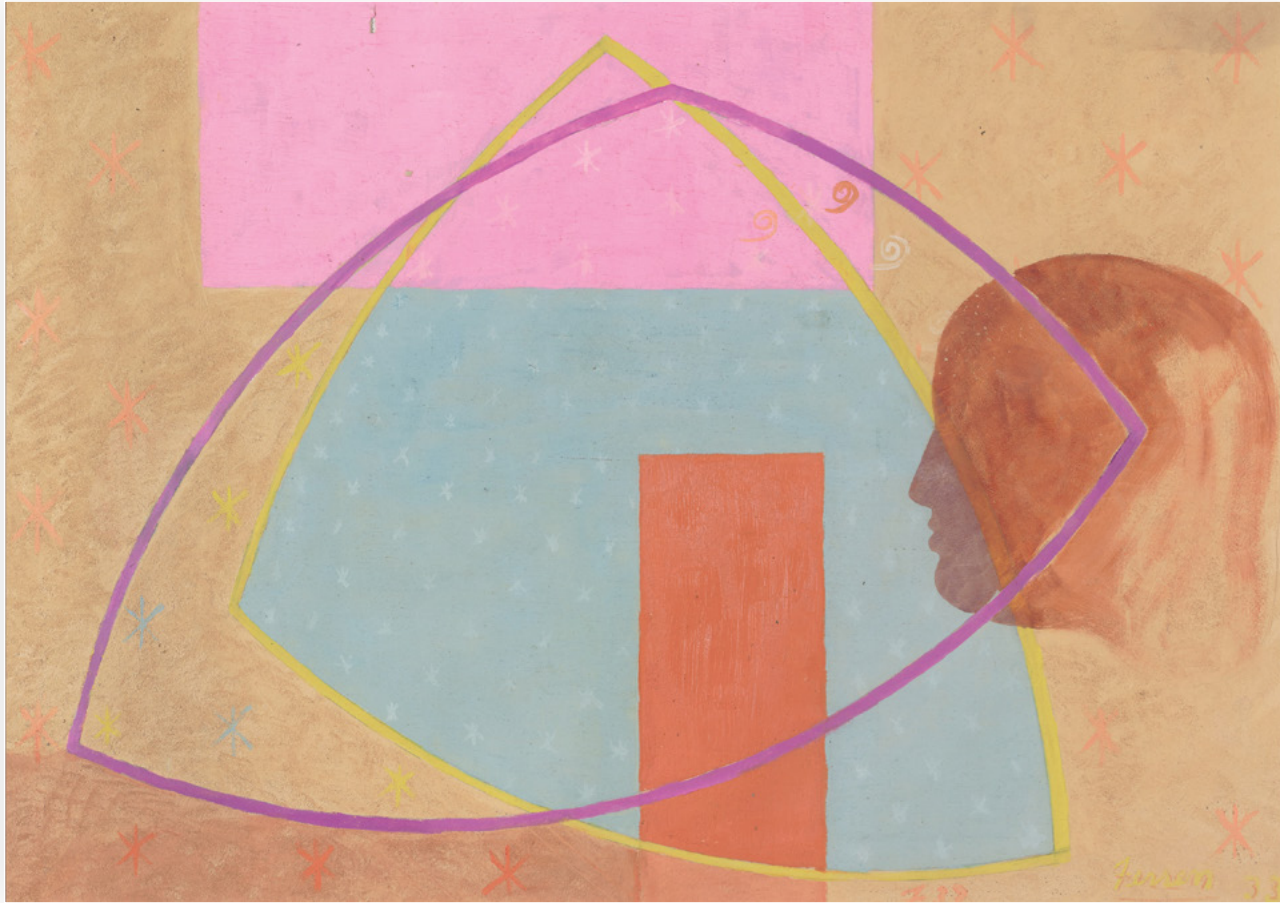
He is the only American painter foreign painters in Paris consider as a painter and whose paintings interest them. – Gertrude Stein



(left) *Untitled VIII* | 1932
gouache on paper | 11 x 8 in.
FG© 140167



(right) *Untitled A7488* | 1929
gouache on paper | 8 1/4 x 7 in.
FG© 207488



Untitled A7493 | 1933 | watercolor and gouache on paper | 17 x 23 3/4 in. | FG© 207493



Mallorca | 1933 | gouache on paper | 8 3/4 x 12 in. | FG© 205978

1940s

New Directions

There is no longer a belief in an objective reality out 'there' and a pure arrangement of lines and 'colors right here'; there is instead the fact of a painted surface where both these elements [reality and abstraction] meet with a third: the artist's emotion. – John Ferren

Sketch for Rug Design 2 | 1942
gouache on paper | 9 x 12 in.
FG© 205971



Untitled Sketch for Rug Design I | 1942
gouache on paper | 8 3/4 x 12 in.
FG© 205970





Night Fugue | 1947 | oil on canvas | 30 x 40 in. | FG© 140158



The Desert and Flowers | 1948 | oil on canvas | 38 x 30 in. | FG© 140161

1950s

Reasserting Representation

At the Stable Gallery in 1957, John Ferren mounted an exhibition of paintings that came to be called his “vase paintings,” works that include *The Vase* (page 12), *The Blue Vase 1* (page 14), and *Still Unstill* (page 15). On seeing the work, Elaine de Kooning approached Ferren and declared, “John, you have betrayed us.” Somehow, she felt the authority to insist that Ferren’s work was a departure from the Abstract Expressionist movement, and therefore a betrayal, concluding that many of the compositions were structured around recognizable vessels and thus representational in scope.

Notwithstanding the absurdity of Elaine de Kooning’s statement (she was a portrait artist and her husband had already made a round trip to representation and back with his Woman series of 1950-52), the crux of the matter was valid and begged the following questions: Was the inclusion of any recognizable representation in a painting tantamount to a dismissal of Abstract Expressionist values? Or was the opposite true? Perhaps Ferren’s new style reflected his belief that the movement was becoming tired, even trite. According to historian Irving Sandler, Ferren had become “convinced that unbridled spontaneity was yielding painting that had become outworn and academic.”

That Abstract Expressionist painting could be seen as academic would have been anathema to a movement that tended to believe that the mind could get in the way of feeling; and yet, that is where the movement found itself; perhaps the rebel had become the institution. But Ferren understood, possibly better than his contemporaries, that Abstract Expressionism truly was a movement supporting a process, not a style or a technique, and it posited the idea that the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of a painting mattered considerably more than the ‘what.’

Continued on page 13



In a 1958 article in Arts Magazine, Ferren wrote, “we faced the canvas with the Self, whatever that was, and we painted. We faced it unarmed, so to speak. The only control was that of the truth, intuitively felt. If it wasn’t true to our feeling, according to protocol it had to be rubbed out.” For Ferren at least, the presence of the intellect in art did not present a contradiction to Abstract Expressionist painting, not if the process was preceded by truth. Ferren continued “the valuable element was the questioning search for the basic motives of painting: the insistence they be real, and a willingness to let the appearance of the picture follow the fact.” Indeed, what came out of the process mattered less than the process itself.

Despite Ferren’s integrity of process which went to the point of a near disregard for the outcome, we are nonetheless moved by the elegance, beauty, and complexity in the work. Ferren’s quest for authenticity led him to a departure from his peers and resulted in compositions as strong and beautiful today as they were provocative in 1957.

Returning to Elaine de Kooning, her comment on the work was predicated on the wrong variable: the appearance of the work. On the contrary, the work was absolutely true to the Abstract Expressionist movement because of how they were painted. Similarly, an exact copy of Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* printed on a 3-D printer would fail to be an Abstract Expressionist painting. Ferren embodied this in his words as much as his work. In a 1958 article in Arts Magazine, Ferren wrote, “The painters of this period shared certain ideas about the process of painting. They did not – and still do not – share a style of painting... it is the outsider who has capitalized on a ‘look’ and made it appear a style.”

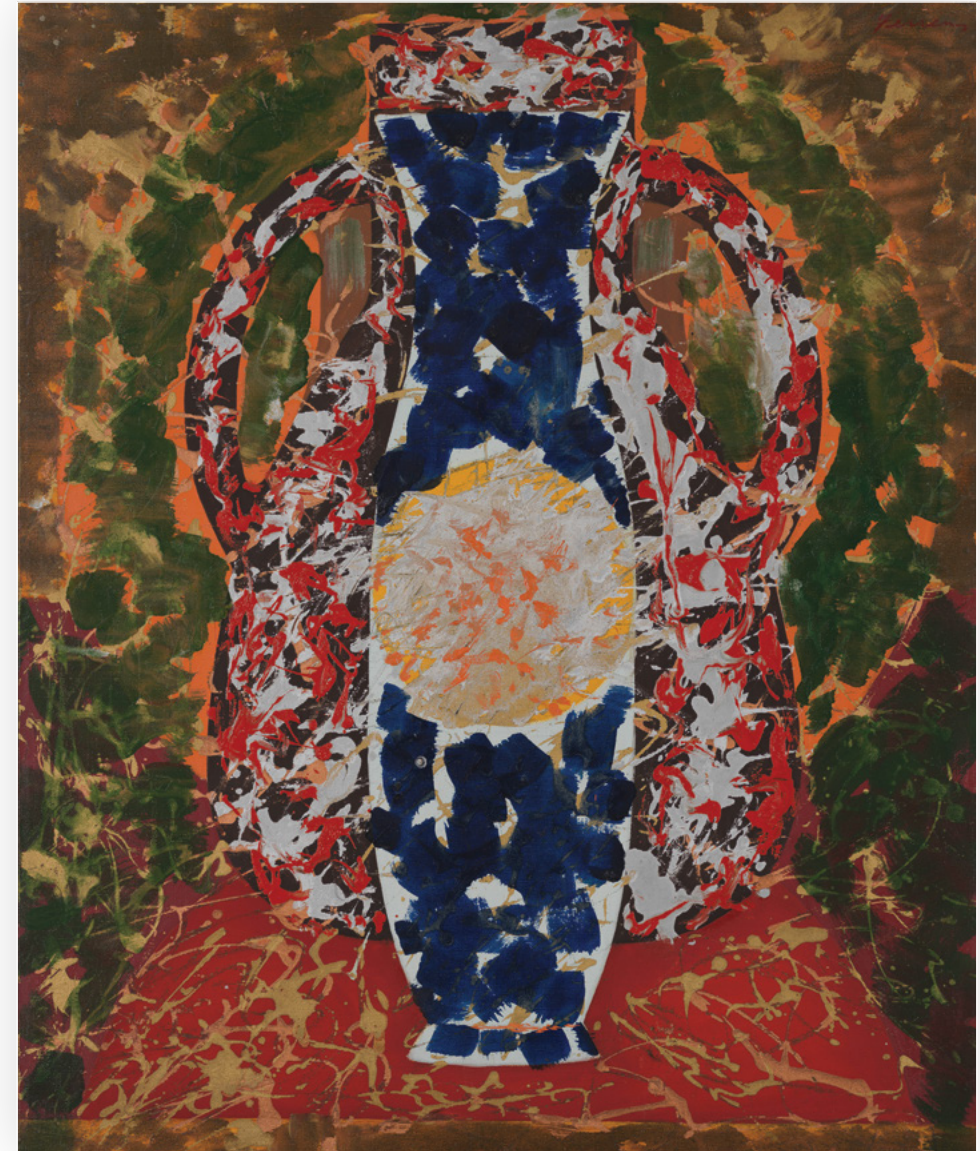
Ferren’s vase paintings were his attempt to marry his insistence on this process with his insistence that art should reflect the intellect. Irving Sandler referred to this apparent duality when he described the work as “an attempt to reconcile a classical ideal with a romantic quest.”

Presumably, Ferren agreed with this prognostication, as reflected in his own comments upon seeing an identifiable object emerge from one of his works:

What does it mean? You tell me. This hits a man right down to where he ticks. All I know is it had to happen. First I started with two lines, like a figure; then came a central ball of fire in a parenthesis. I closed the parenthesis, and there was a vase. I fought against it, but once I accepted the limitations of a central image, I never felt freer. These are even more free than any drip thing I ever did.

Contemporary critic Dore Ashton all but agreed with Ferren’s observations regarding the apparent contradiction of finding freedom with a limited construct by relating the work to the ancient Greek ideas of *flux and stasis*. From Ashton’s perspective, flux was captured by many of the artists during this period by their relating “sensuous experience of perpetual movement and the energy of life.” But in Ferren’s paintings, “Energy...is manifest when contained and not distinguishable when released.” The form and symmetry contain the energy and therefore make it witnessable. This is an expression of stasis. Elaborating, Ashton insists that Ferren’s work imbues “an order of idealism characterized by static symmetry.”

Capturing stasis is a contradictory endeavor; artists must use a dynamic process to achieve the stillness they seek. In the work of John Ferren, we find a beautiful resolution to his inspired pursuit.

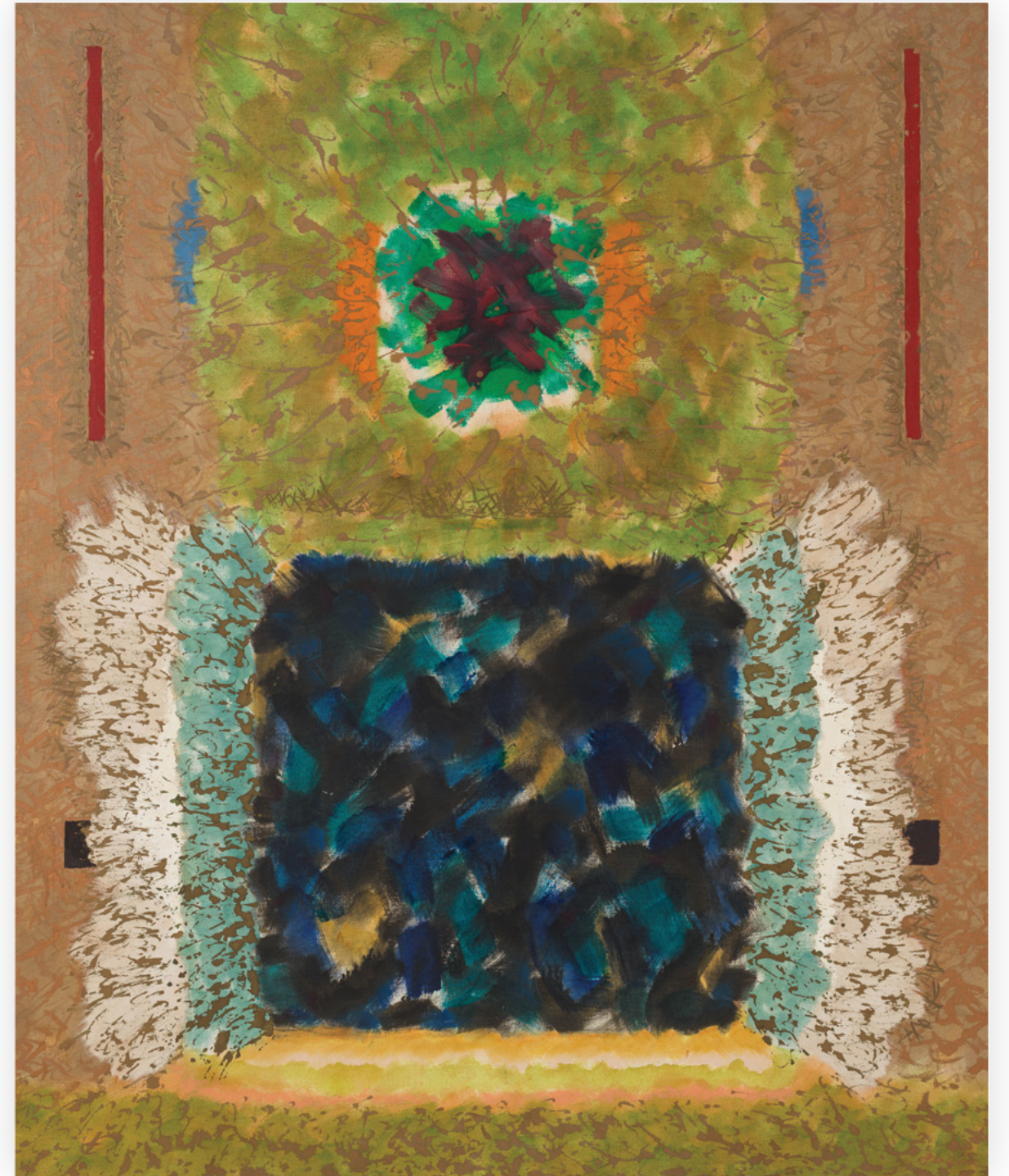


The Blue Vase #1 | 1956 | oil on canvas | 30 x 24 in. | FG© 140162

(right) *Cathedra Magna* | 1956 | oil on canvas | 73 x 61 in. | FG© 140154



Still Unstill | 1956 | oil on canvas | 25 x 30 in. | FG© 140163





Dog Walker | 1958 | oil on canvas | 73 x 55 in. | FG© 140150



The Bloom | 1956 | oil on canvas | 69 x 55 1/2 in. | FG© 140145

1960s

Color Demands Control

Color demands control. You can't slap the colors on over one another, so the color always kept a certain element of discipline in my work... I was not one of the red-hot brush throwers. – John Ferren

(detail) - My Irish Rose, page 32



Unfinished | 1961
oil on canvas | 65 1/2 x 50 1/2 in.
FG© 140147





Untitled | 1962 | oil on canvas | 50 x 45 in. | FG© 140155



Untitled | 1961 | oil on canvas | 40 x 40 in. | FG© 140159



The Summer After The Summer, Beirut | 1963 | oil on canvas | 39 x 39 in. | FG© 140165



Moss Rocks | 1962 | oil on canvas | 36 x 36 in. | FG© 140157

A Rose for Rae | 1962
oil on canvas | 72 x 76 in.
FG© 140144

It is a mistake to say that the modern artist sought to eradicate the concept of nature. In the first place, it is impossible. No form, shape or color is conceivable to the human mind that has not at some time and place been experienced by man. – John Ferren



(cover) **Blue Season** | 1961
oil on canvas | 75 x 75 in.
FG© 140143



My Irish Rose | 1962
oil on canvas | 72 x 76 in.
FG© 140148



Battam Bang | 1962
oil on canvas | 54 x 54 in.
FG© 207479



Jericho | 1962
oil on canvas | 64 x 64 in.
FG© 140149

The bursts of vivid brush strokes often suggest layers of mini-explosions. A number seem to have be inspired by nature, particularly the growth energy of blossoms and vegetation.

Loose, gestural strokes retain evidence of the artist's hand and thus tend to seem spontaneous and immediate. By contrast the organic abstractions from the 30's have a certain distance that can be linked, in part, to the aura of history now surrounding their period.

– Phyllis Braff, New York Times, 1993



Amagansett Afternoon | 1961
oil on canvas | 65 1/2 x 71 in.
FG© 140164



Tierra Caliente | 1961
oil on canvas | 65 x 57 in.
FG© 140146



Untitled | 1960
oil on canvas | 72 x 60 in.
FG© 140151





Findlay Galleries, New York, 2021

Selected Exhibitions

2021	<i>From Paris to Springs</i> , Findlay Galleries, New York, NY (solo) <i>Summer Selections</i> , Findlay Galleries, New York, NY <i>Summer Selections</i> , Findlay Galleries, Palm Beach, FL <i>Lyrical Abstraction</i> , Findlay Galleries, New York, NY	2000	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY <i>The American Avant-Garde: A Decade of Change 1936-1946</i> , The Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, Greenwich, CT
2020	<i>American Abstractionists</i> , Findlay Galleries, New York, NY <i>American Abstractionists</i> , Findlay Galleries, Palm Beach, FL	1998	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY Snyder Fine Art, New York, NY <i>Defining the Edge: Early American Abstraction</i> , Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA The Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA
2017	<i>John Ferren and Ward Jackson: Edge + Color</i> , Findlay Galleries, Palm Beach, FL	1997	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York NY
2016	<i>John Ferren, Ward Jackson, Ilya Bolotowsky and Leon Polk Smith and: Edge + Color</i> , Findlay Galleries, New York, NY	1996 - 1993	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY (three shows)
2015	Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, NY David Findlay Jr Gallery, New York, NY	1993	<i>The Abstract Spirit: John Ferren (1905-1970)</i> , Curated by Helen Harrison, Pollock-Krasner Found. Queens Col.; SUNY, Stonybrook; East Hampton, NY
2013	<i>About Abstraction</i> , David Findlay Jr Gallery, New York, NY	1992 - 1985	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY (six solo shows)
2012	<i>John Ferren: Works from the 1950s – 60s</i> , David Findlay Jr Gallery, New York, NY	1985 - 1979	A.M. Sachs Gallery, New York, NY (five shows, three solo)
2011	<i>East End: Artists of the Hamptons</i> , David Findlay Jr Gallery, New York, NY	1979	Retrospective, The Graduate Center of the City Univ. of New York, New York, NY
2009	<i>American Abstractions Part 2: Paintings 1950's – Present</i> , Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY <i>Hot and Cool Abstractions, 1940s to the Present</i> , Spanierman Modern, New York, NY	1978 - 1972	A.M. Sachs Gallery, New York, NY (five solo)
2008	<i>Order and Intuition: American Abstraction from the Patty & Jay Baker Naples Museum of Art, 1913-1954</i> , Hollis Taggart Gallery, New York, NY	1971	John Ferren Memorial Show, The Century Club, New York, NY
2007	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY <i>Leaders in American Modernism</i> , Naples Museum of Art, Naples, FL	1969	A.M. Sachs Gallery, New York, NY (solo) The Parrish Museum, Southampton, NY (solo)
2006	<i>Geometric Abstraction and Color Function: Two Generations</i> , D. Wigmore Fine Art Inc., New York, NY	1965 - 1968	Rose Fried Gallery, New York, NY (solo)
2005	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY <i>Art of Tomorrow: Hilla Rebay and Solomon R. Guggenheim</i> , Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY <i>Jean Hélion and American Art</i> , National Academy Museum, New York, NY <i>Artists & Nature on Eastern Long Island: 1940's to the Present</i> , Spainerman Gallery at East Hampton, NY <i>New York School: Another View</i> , Opalka Gallery, Sage Colleges, Albany, NY <i>Hilla Rebay & the Museum of Non-Objective Painting</i> , DC Moore Gallery, New York, NY	1964	Centre d'Art, Centre d'Art Beirut, Lebanon
2003	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY <i>The American Avant-Garde in Paris 1918-1939</i> , An Ambivalent Fascination, Musée d'Art Américain, Giverny, France	1962	Rose Fried Gallery, New York, NY (solo)
2001	Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, NY	1958	The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC (solo)
		1958 - 1954	Stable Gallery, New York, NY (five shows)
		1953	Alexander Iolas Gallery, New York, NY (solo)
		1952	San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA (solo) Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA (solo)
		1949	Kleemann Gallery, New York, NY (solo)
		1947	Kleemann Gallery, New York, NY (solo)
		1942	The Willard Gallery, New York, NY (solo)
		1940	Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
		1938 - 1937	Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, NY (two shows)
		1937	Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL
		1936	Pierre Loeb, Paris, France Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, NY (solo) San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA (solo)
		1932	Galerie Zack, Paris, France (solo)
		1930	Art Center, San Francisco, CA (solo)



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